


In the face of unique challenges and the extraordinary risk exposure inherent in the tremendous number of flight hours flown, the Naval Aviation Training Command has maintained an enviable safety record. We set the foundation for all fleet aviators in the areas of discipline, professionalism and risk management. Here at the headquarters and throughout the wings, we bring

together the unique strengths of the Naval Air Forces and the Naval Education and Training Command to produce the world's finest aviators, ready on arrival for tasking in the Global War on Terror. As always, it's a great time to FLY NAVY! 

RDML Quinn is the Commander, Naval Air Training Command.

A Matter of Trust

By Cdr. John Minners

Training student aviators involves significant risks. The backbone of the Naval Training Command's (NATRACOM's) risk-mitigation efforts is the instructor. Although syllabi, NATOPS, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) provide many built-in risk controls, we rely on flight instructors to safely train our fledgling aviators and overcome the day-to-day hurdles.


Being a flight instructor looks like the perfect job: Come in, fly a few times, and go home. The reality is that the daily grind of lengthy briefs, debriefs, detailed grade sheets, ground jobs, and the physical rigors of flying can result in significant fatigue. When you factor in trying to get quality family time after sea duty, time rapidly becomes something in short supply for our instructors. The nonstop pace, especially in the hot summer months, can leave instructors exhausted by the end of the week. Our instructors magnificently perform and do a tremendous job balancing all their requirements, but it is a constant battle to maintain the highest standards.

In general, our flight instructors do a fine job guarding against complacency and recognizing they are only a few seconds away from a mishap if they do not give their full attention at all times. However another by-product of flying with students is complacency. Our instructors become masters of flying their aircraft and anticipating student errors. This situation can lead to a mind-set of having seen it all and being able to handle anything. Half of the NATRACOM FY06 Class A flight mishaps and numerous lesser ones directly were caused by instructor complacency.

Instructors develop a "box" of how much error they will accept from a student. A new instructor's box is small, allowing only minor student errors. This practice actually can hamper student learning: Students need to

make mistakes to learn. As instructors gain experience, their box grows and grows. The instructor's "seen it all and can handle anything" mind-set develops, whether they realize it or not. Usually, a student then will make a mistake that gets the attention of the instructor, who will reduce the box to an appropriate size. The key is allowing a student enough rope to make a mistake and learn but not enough to exceed the limits of the aircraft or the instructor's ability to recover. That line is difficult to define, and numerous mishaps have been caused by instructors letting students go too far.

Pressure to "get the X" is a reality for our instructors. Although some of it is perceived pressure, much of it is real. All squadrons get behind in production for various reasons, the top reason usually being poor weather. Reduction in instructor manning caused by Individual Augments (IAs) has added pressure to the equation. Instructors see the great lengths the squadrons go to in catching up, and, as professionals, support those efforts. But there is not a flight in the training command that cannot be completed tomorrow. The bottom line is every skipper would rather lose the X than have a mishap. Our instructors must make sure they know when to say when. That decision can be difficult for the results-oriented personalities that tend to become aviators.

Very few other places in naval aviation allow aviators as much freedom to complete the mission on their own terms. NATRACOM squadron schedules are just too big for the skipper or Ops O to watch over every flight. We trust our instructors to use ORM and make the right decisions at their level. Those decisions enable us to complete our mission, while maintaining our tremendous safety record. 

Cdr. Minners is the CNATRA safety officer.